

Planning for Success in Social Marketing Campaigns

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Watershed outreach efforts over the years have earned a reputation and stigma of not being very effective. One reason for this is we haven't always done a good job of planning for success. We have agency and organizational management plans. We help farmers and ranchers write and implement water quality management and implementation plans. All of our on-ground restoration efforts have intensive implementation plans. Many of us even have personal five-year or ten-year plans. Why then have so many of our past water quality outreach plans consisted of language like, "prepare and distribute 500 brochures about properly disposing of hazardous household waste," or, "write three water quality articles for the local newspaper." How do we know those are the best outputs? How do we know our distribution methods will reach our target audience? Do we even know our target audience and their barriers to changing their behavior?

The increased popularity over the past several years of social marketing approaches in watershed restoration efforts has addressed some of these issues on some watersheds throughout the country. However, there are two main reasons why the above mentioned problems are still so prevalent: Some people say they are conducting social marketing campaigns, but they are really conducting outreach business as usual; and others want to engage in true social marketing campaigns but they lack the knowledge to do it correctly themselves and/or they lack the money to hire consultants to do the work.

There are several books, toolkits and articles available that can help groups and individuals understand the social marketing process and start planning for success. The free guidebook I wrote—Getting Your Feet Wet With Social Marketing—is available by clicking one of the links on this page.

Successful social marketing efforts require an understanding of the subject matter. In order to put together a good plan you need to be able to define the problem and identify possible solutions that can be addressed by behavior change among members of your community/target audience(s).

Look at the pyramid graphic below, taken from the Getting Your feet Wet... guide. The foundation of the pyramid is the problem. You build your campaign from there.

Social Marketing Approach

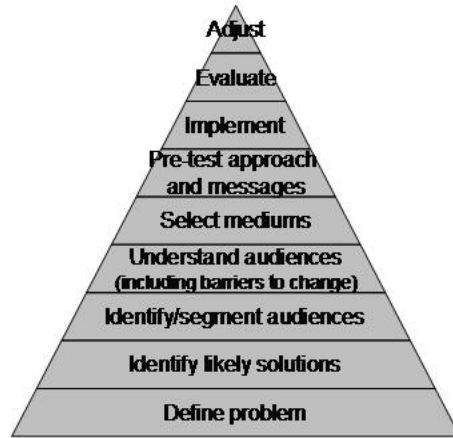


Fig. 2.1

Defining the problem, which is usually done through a Total Maximum Daily (TMDL) process, or some other water quality analysis, often indicates more than one problem. To be successful at changing behavior, you will want to narrow the scope of your campaign so you are asking people to do one simple action at a time. For example, if the scientific data indicates that nutrients from fertilizers are causing increased plant growth and decreased dissolved oxygen, you might want to target home owners with a campaign designed to entice people to fertilize once a year, or sweep up excess dry fertilizer from sidewalks and driveways, or to use a professional lawn care service. From that list, you would choose one behavior to promote at a time. To some people this may appear to be counter-intuitive. After all, there are multiple actions people can take to address the fertilizer issue, there may be multiple causes of the dissolved oxygen problem, and there may be many more problems than just dissolved oxygen. It may seem tempting to get out the “outreach shotgun,” but resist this temptation. There are many studies that support the idea that most people will not and can not choose from a shopping list of actions, especially if they are not highly invested in the end result. Most people in public opinion surveys will indicate that they care about the environment, but there is a big difference between saying you care about an issue and being highly invested in the outcome.

I suggest you start small, pick the low hanging fruit first, then move on to more difficult behaviors and audiences to change.

Make certain the goals and desired outcomes for your project are clearly defined at the beginning. This will make it easier to check in along the way and make certain you are on track.

If you haven’t already gathered as much, social marketing is not completely a linear process. As you can see in the figure above, There is a suggested order, but sometimes

more than one step needs to be considered at the same time. When defining the problem and determining behaviors to promote, it is important to start defining evaluation measures. It may also be necessary to start defining and segmenting your audience in order to choose the action to promote.

I'm a big fan of writing down your plans and making adjustments as needed. The social marketing process is organic in nature and it builds upon itself. The information gathered in the audience research step, for example, will help you determine the messages and mediums you will use. The insights you gain during the research phase may set you off in the direction you believed you would be going down from the outset. Other times, the audience sends you down a completely different path. The reason we do audience research is, that no matter how smart we are about the subject matter, only the audience knows what it will take to make them change one or more behaviors. We'll explore audience research more in depth in future installments. For now, it is important to understand the water quality problems in your watershed and which action(s) people need to take to correct those problems.